

Spring 2013

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Recommended Citation

Hayford, Martin (2013) "Popular Impact of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution," *ESSAI*: Vol. 11, Article 20.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol11/iss1/20>

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Popular Impact of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution

by Martin Hayford

(History 2225)

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was extolled as a revolution of the people. But how much did the actual people of Russia have to do with the revolution? To what degree were they manipulated? Vladimir Lenin and the other inner-circle Bolsheviks may have considered themselves the “common man,” but this was true only in theory. In practice, the common man’s Russian Revolution was entirely removed from that of the Bolsheviks’.

In her memoir, *Marooned in Moscow: The Story of an American Woman Imprisoned in Soviet Russia*, Marguerite Harrison illuminated a rarely seen view of common Russian people directly following the Bolshevik Revolution. In doing so she revealed how the revolution influenced the common people—an influence of tainted gifts and unchecked repression.

The earliest Bolshevik-instituted changes that affected the common people were great, sweeping reforms. However, these reforms manifested themselves locally as a very personal intrusion into people’s daily lives. One example was the push for education, a value that was stressed heavily by the communist party. The education contained elements of indoctrination as well as Russification, yet as a new phenomenon was an exciting prospect for many Russians. Marguerite Harrison discovers this early into her journey, just after crossing into Russia: “I found that there had formerly been one primary school in Lochnitsa, with sixty-five pupils. At that time, four hundred pupils were registered in the primary schools and the *gymnasium* or secondary school” (Harrison 39). This fact surprises her greatly, as does the location of the aforementioned schools; they were on the frontier and in the war zone. But this was no exception in the Bolshevik push. To balance out this cost of widespread higher education, the Bolsheviks benefitted from the opportunity for political indoctrination. Lenin clearly had no qualms with regard to politicizing education; in fact, he conveniently found the issue unavoidable: “The very term “apolitical” or “nonpolitical” education,’ said Lenin in November 1920, ‘is a piece of bourgeois hypocrisy, nothing but a deception of the masses.... We must put the matter frankly, and openly declare, despite all the old lies, that education cannot help but be connected with politics’” (McClelland 820). This explosion of education coupled with the Bolshevik views of politics in schools created a wholly different kind of intrusion into the life of the Russian people.

In one way, the opportunity for education was accepted gratefully—if also a bit warily. This wariness proved to be justified as the schools became less about actual education, and more about social manipulation. Lenin’s main goal was for “...the ‘bad’ and ‘unskilled’ Russian workers to be ‘schooled in the culture of capitalism’—to become skilled and disciplined workers and to send their sons to engineering college—so that the country could overcome its backwardness in the transition towards socialism” (Figs 743). Although the intent seemed pure, the implementation of such a system was seen as little more than meddling. Not only that, but it was also a decidedly *deceitful* system. Under the guise of furthering education, Lenin and the Bolsheviks instituted what amounted to a secret agenda. Whether or not this was successful is not entirely clear. It was easy for Lenin to say he would like to change the way people thought, but actually changing people’s thoughts was met with subdued and whispered resistance. This kind of intrusion—one where millions of people were not only newly enrolled as students, but then involuntarily indoctrinated—was drastic, and in many cases, unwelcome. However, because of other intrusions that initially benefitted the commoners, the indoctrination tended to be overlooked.

Perhaps the most pleasing change implemented by the Bolsheviks was the redistribution of land. One of the first decisions the revolutionaries made was to return the land to the people who worked on it. Although they were neither convinced by the legitimacy of this action nor understood the complex social and political implications, they were certainly not going to complain. When explaining this socialization in her book, Harrison wrote that the people may have complained about the specifics of the situation, “but they will never rise *en masse* against any government which leaves them in possession of the land” (Harrison 37). This was a very calculated move by the Bolsheviks and, indeed, it worked to their advantage in placating their people. In reality, the idea for the nationalization and subsequent socialization of the land was a Socialist-Revolutionary movement, initially unaligned with the communist ideals of the Bolsheviks. These Socialist-Revolutionaries had the popular support of the peasants, necessitating the Bolsheviks to collaborate with the intent to absorb the other movement.

In explanation of these actions, Trotsky said, “The political expropriation of the Socialist-Revolutionary party was a necessary prerequisite to the economic expropriation of the landlords and the bourgeoisie” (Lissner 147). This statement reveals the true intent of the Bolsheviks that would not manifest itself to the Russian people until Stalin’s collectivization. The system created with the peasant landowners was never meant to be permanent, but was indeed a stepping stone similar to the New Economic Policy (NEP). This stepping stone, however, was less concerned with the ideology of communism and more to do with garnering political support. As mentioned by Harrison, these newly land-wealthy people would have no desire to raise arms against their seemingly generous government; furthermore, they would be all the more likely to support them in political matters. In this way, it seemed to be a successful strategy for both sides—at least for the time being.

It was in the infancy of this program that Harrison observed the effects. Even then she mentions that while clearly happy about owning their own land, the people were yet suspicious of the implications: “Many [peasants] of them are often dubious about this free gift from the government, and officials are often approached by the peasants with offers to pay for their newly acquired interests” (Harrison 37). Once again, the people recognized the taint that was associated with this gift—just as they had with their education. It was unfortunate that their material gain coupled with a perceived improvement over their old autocratic government masked any objection that might be had; it was rare to find a common man who would rather be a serf than own his land.

The issues of education and land socialization were underhanded and contrived on the part of the Bolsheviks, yet they both allowed for major gains in the peasant classes. The morality of these intrusions is unclear, but the impression is that any benefit to the common man was incidental.

There were plenty of Bolshevik activities where morality was thrown out the window and there were no benefits for the common people—incidental or otherwise. Harrison’s clearest experience with this is her imprisonment in Moscow. It was not necessarily the treatment—which was by her accounts civil—but the act of imprisonment itself which was unjust. Ironically, Marguerite Harrison’s arrest was one of the few that held any legitimacy; she was an American spy. But the Russians with whom she was detained had a different story to share. None of them seemed to be guilty of anything of importance. Indeed many of them were deemed counter-revolutionaries, a catch-all term that was used by the Bolsheviks to describe anyone they wanted to imprison. The most disturbing case was that of Elizaveta Eduardovna who at the time, “had been arrested some weeks before, and up to that time had no knowledge of the charges against her” (Harrison 253). It is important to note that the occupants of this prison and many others were not only former peasants; a great many prisoners were formerly of the aristocracy. In a way, though, these people were newly relegated to the same social class as the peasants, with the Bolsheviks replacing them as the ruling class.

What all of these prisoners had in common was a question: Why am I here? Even those who were formally charged did not understand what their crime was. These “counter-revolutionaries,”

more often than not, were nothing of the sort, but that did not worry the Bolsheviks. They willingly drew up "...omnibus clauses that gave courts arbitrary powers to sentence undesirables for alleged counterrevolutionary activity...For the first time in legal history, the function of legal proceedings was defined to be not dispensing justice but terrorizing the population" (Pipes 401). The effect of this system was profound. When it was impossible to trust the courts to have even a shred of morality—not to mention legality—the Russian people had nowhere to turn. Now it became possible to unintentionally be opposed to the government; it was at the discretion of the Bolsheviks to imprison their people as they saw fit. It was upon this realization that the earlier wariness and discontent became horror to those who realized what their nation had become.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was a successful revolution...for the Bolsheviks. With the Tsar ousted and the Provisional Government under Alexander Kerensky overpowered, the Bolsheviks faced little political opposition. What really ensured their success, however, was the support of the people. These people were bribed, indoctrinated, and, if they still resisted, imprisoned. The inevitable conclusion of these facts is that the revolution's success did not extend to the people. Although the revolution was intended to be "of the people," it ended up being against them. Harrison's firsthand account is one of only a few that truly revealed the very different revolution of the people.

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